



Simplifying the season

This is the season to be jolly, fa la la la la, la la la Aaaaaahhhhhh! The season to be jolly? Hmmmm ... for many of us, this is the season of folly rather than jolly. We rush around trying to live up to our culture's unhealthy expectations of Christmas rather than allowing ourselves to be led, like the Wise Men, on a journey toward the Christ Child.

Our culture tells us that more is better. More gifts, more decorations, more food, more parties, more of everything makes for a better Christmas. However, a central truth of the Christian nativity story is that more is not always better. In fact, sometimes more is just, well, *more*. Luke's gospel tells us that our Savior was born not in a luxury hotel but in a stable and that his first visitors were humble shepherds. Matthew's gospel tells us that though the Wise Men brought Jesus precious gifts, they did not bring him a whole cartload of stuff. They brought him one gift apiece.

Somewhere along the way, things have gone terribly awry. Churches need to provide an alternative voice, one that allows people to practice simplicity in giving, to slow down instead of speed up, to savor the season of Advent as well as that of Christmas, to learn to wait patiently for God's wonderful surprises.

For the past two years my church has tried to provide a concrete way to share this voice with its congregants and the surrounding community by offering an alternative gifts fair. In mid-November for about three days, Northminster's fellowship hall hosts several local charities and fair trade organizations. Some of the local charities provide Christmas items such as ornaments in return for donations. Other organizations provide a gift card so that the buyer's loved one will know a donation has been made in his or her honor.

Ten Thousand Villages, one of the fair trade organizations represented, provides items made by artisans in developing nations and guarantees that these artisans are paid a fair price

Resources for simplifying the holidays, alternative giving and fair trade:

- www.simpleliving.org
- www.newdream.org
- www.agreatergift.org
- www.tenthousandvillages.com

Resources for the Christian discipline of simplicity:

Simpler Living, Compassionate Life: A Christian Perspective, edited by Michael Schut
"The Discipline of Simplicity," in *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster

for their items. The International Fair Trade Association, of which Ten Thousand Villages is a member, is also committed to gender equity, good working conditions and care for the environment.

In addition to inviting outside organizations to participate in the gifts fair, church members sell homemade baked goods and crafts they have created and then give all the profits from these sales to one of the organizations represented at the fair.

Last year we also offered a "goodie bag" for children that they could delve into while their parents shopped. The "goodie bag" included a coloring book donated by the Nature Conservancy, Habitat for Humanity Christmas cards the children could decorate, a small box of crayons and other similar items.

For our congregation, the alternative gifts fair has been a wonderful time of fellowship, an opportunity to show hospitality to our community and a way to help people think more carefully about their Christmas giving.

Not every congregation may want to undertake a large event like an alternative gifts fair. All churches, however, have both the ability and the responsibility to help their members focus on what is most important about the Christmas season. As Christians, we are called to be transformed by the renewing of our minds

rather than conformed to this world (Rom. 12:2), and practicing the spiritual discipline of simplicity provides a concrete way for us to live out this guiding principle.

The organization Alternatives for Simpler Living offers these tips for a simpler, more meaningful Christmas:

- *Plan ahead.* Hold a family meeting before the Advent/Christmas season begins and decide what everyone really wants to do.
- *Avoid debt.* Purchase only those gifts that are truly within your budget.
- *Avoid stress.* Give yourself the freedom to eliminate at least a few activities from your schedule.
- *Simplify giving.* Draw names at work and in your friendship circles rather than everyone in the group giving everyone else a gift. Set a price limit on the gifts.
- *Give alternative gifts.* Make a donation to a worthy cause in honor of someone. Consider giving gifts that cost virtually nothing: a coupon book for future services (doing the dishes, baby-sitting, etc.) or something handmade, sewn, baked, etc.
- *Practice fair trade.* Buy products from organizations that ensure workers are paid fairly and treated humanely.
- *Observe Advent.* In corporate worship and individual devotions, observing Advent can help Christians stay focused on the real "reason for the season" and remember that ultimately, all time is God's time.
- *Make changes slowly but persistently.* It takes time to change our habits and attitudes, even when we really want to!

The old Shaker hymn proclaims, "It's a gift to be simple, it's a gift to be free." Simplicity and freedom really do belong together. Observing a simpler Christmas season can set us free to bring to the Christ Child what really matters most: our hearts, our minds, our time, our talent ... our everything. **BT**